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ABSTRACT

This opening address at the annual conference of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) introduces a community of ethnic scholars who make a considerable contribution to American Literature. The focus of the conference and the organization is to show that American literature does not have to be written in English and does not have to come out of a European tradition. Ethnic American writers must work to achieve a sense of community, and MELUS is the means by which this can be done. An editorial committee has been formed to work on publishing MELUS books. The organization attempts to keep standards of scholarship and integrity high among its members. Its multi-ethnic approach has been criticized by some who argue that it lessens the integrity of each group's cultural space, thus forcing an unwanted sort of assimilation. But the philosophy of the organization is that separate divisions for various ethnic groups will have less power to make an impact on American literature as a whole than will a unified group. MELUS will continue to proclaim the totality of American literature through its multi-ethnic approach. (VM)

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A COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS

by

Katharine D. Newman

Opening Address of the First Annual Conference of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States

[Expanded version]

Here we are! At last! Our first conference! Welcome, welcome!

My talk, as you see on the program, is "A Community of Scholars." I will describe "community" and "scholarship," but there is a third word. It is missing now, but it will make the title complete when we add it.

First, "community." Now I suspect that some of you have come here planning to indulge in that very modern act,"networking." To me, networking is something which is done when two or more computers get their programs together. A community is formed when two or more people put their heads and coffee cups together, when they share ideas and feelings and unite in fellowship. They communicate.

And we want to do a lot of communicating in our community during this conference. But I hope that, when you go home, you will continue the communication, that in fact you will want to tell some of the others here just how they were wrong. For a true community engenders dissent as well as fostering growth for all members.

To put it more explicitly: Community, to us in MELUS,

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does not mean conformity nor uniformity. We believe in diversity. We believe in intellectual excitement. We believe in fluid boundaries and in speaking out for new definitions and new critical theories. We are united in resisting the pressures of the Establishment.

This we have said from the first. At our first public meeting at MLA--I remember it well, standing here now, 13 years later--I stood up and said, "We want to expand the canon of American literature." I believe that Life has a way of putting us on the spot, at some time or other, and that was my time. It was the bravest thing I have ever done! I had said to my daughters, "Am I really going to say this? Me--with a dissertation on a totally obscure Victorian novelist, challenging the experts in American literature? And right in MLA?" And they said, "Yes, you are." And I did!

Actually I had excellent protection, for on the platform behind me were four great American scholars: Norman Holmes Pearson, Saunders Redding, Brom Weber, and Robert E. Spiller! In fact, the program was in honor of Dr. Spiller for his work as editor of the Literary History of the United States (LHUS). Norman Holmes Pearson read the citation. Saunders Redding read a paper, "They've Taken My Song and Gone," and Brom Weber gave the keynote speech, describing the multi-ethnic character of American society, from Colonial times on. A specialist in American studies, Weber particularly stressed the fact that LHUS was the first history of American literature which tied in the texts with the social and political history of the United States.

Let me digress a moment to speak of Robert E. Spiller. In the the last decade it has seemed to be in fashion for scholars to put down LHUS as too limited, too specific, and too white-male oriented. But the group which produced it were known as the Literary Radicals, and they encountered great storms of criticism in their time.

And Spiller himself was flexible. He heard our message and encouraged us. Look up his article, "The Cycle and the Roots: National Identity in American Literature," in Toward a New American Literary History in 1980. You will find him saying just what we're saying now--which is just what we have been saying since 1973: that good scholarship requires us to go back and trace all the roots of all the groups who have come to America or existed in America and honor their contributions. from. as Ishmael Reed has taught us to say, Before Columbus to those who are stealing across our borders at this moment.

What we were stressing then was explicit: to expand the canon. all the writings of all the Americans must be respected, and, second, American literature does not have to be in English. Getting recognition of that cardinal principle was a long battle-not yet won. "You mean to tell us that people who write in other languages can be good writers?"

"Yes . The chief difference is in the size and kind of audience. The homesick plaint of a Polish immigrant may be as poignant and effective as a love song in conventional English

prosody. The difference may be in the number of Polish-American readers to appreciate this poem. But literary merit does not equate with audience size, does it?"

These things we had to say then. But here and now they no longer need be said. For, over the years, MELUS has added a more positive dimension. We have come to be less concerned about confronting and converting the "traditionalists: we are much more interested in learning about each other's cultural expression. We are not here today to weld a unified front against our opponents (though we certainly see the continuing need for action)--but to celebrate our own unity, the unity we have discovered by each expressing our uniqueness. Our separate identities bond us together.

How did we achieve this community? It was as much due to vexation as to vision. Lots of us belonged already to "special interest" groups. At the annual meetings of the North-east Modern Language Association (NEMLA), there was always a good session on Afro-American Literature. And there was a good one on Jewish-American Literature. But Stewart Rodnon was vexed. He was very aware of the Puerto Rican, American Indian, and all the European-ethnic literatures of the East Coast. So one year we found a new listing, with the capacious title of "Ethnic Literature Other than Jewish and Black." And people from the Jewish-American and the Afro-American sessions came too, and we formed a congenial group, many of whom are MELUS members today, including Joe Skerrett, the editor of our journal.

But NEMLA as far from our "Mother," the MLA itself. In 1972, when I wanted to learn more about Black literature, I attended a session chaired by Darwin Turner, representing the College Literature Association, in New York city, in the same hotel, and listed in the MLA Program issue--but held on December 26, the day before the MLA convention began! Literary apartheid. I was more outraged than merely "vexed"! I carried my ire to Dan Walden and Jean Fagan Yellin, and they said,"So? Do something about it."

And that's why there was Seminar #85 at MLA/Chicago in 1973. The title was Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States--but we were assigned to the hotel for the programs in Foreign Languages. [As a point of fact,it took us a few years to win the right to be in the same rooms used by "American Literature."]

It was a Chicago-in-winter day. We had to put on boots and heavy clothing to take the shuttle from hotel to hotel. It was an anxious journey. Although I had sent out eighty letters to people whom I hoped might care, I was sure of only a few. Among them were Edith Blicksilver, Evelyn Avery, and Dan Walden. And when we got there--the room was full! People were standing. Thirty-one vexed people. And, yes, they did want to organize.

Ten of us met the next morning, decided on the name and divided the responsibilities amongst ourselves. By summer, after we spread the word to other like-minded people, including those who could not/would not attend MLA conferences, we had 35 members paying their $3 dues to Ernest Falbo. We started a newsletter. We planned our meeting to honor Dr.

Spiller,where we would announce our defiant ideas.

And thus we started. We were conspirators; we were rebels. We sat together in meetings after we had placed our mimeographed "ads" on all the chairs. Edith Blicksilver, time and again, found ways of standing up and announcing MELUS in discussions. It was great fun.

But all did not go well. Many of us who were active were white, some Jewish-American, some Euro-ethnic. There were those who gave us two years at most. "A Black/White organization will split. Such a union cannot endure."

And then two applications for membership arrived. I never figured how we reached them, but Tomas Rivera and Blyden Jackson were behind us!

Still--we seemed close to death by choking at our second big meeting (San Francisco, 1975). In 1974 I was scared but I was in control. The following year the meeting had been arranged and was to be chaired by Brom Weber. At the last minute he found he'd been double-booked and had to deliver a paper at another meeting. Dan Walden stepped in (again!) and suggested I chair it. This is not to say I saved the day. But the fact was that the program was all-male and the feminists were boycotting it. We learned how to make friends then.

Well, I grabbed the mike and held on. There was a clash between Frank Chin and David Wand. And a violent confrontation between Ishmael Reed and the Jewish respondents.

But we didn't split. And we gained a reputation for

feistiness that stood us in good stead when, in 1977, I came to California. Two people who had been in the audience in San Francisco in 1975, were willing to accept me as editor and to give us seed money to start our journal. You know the prestige which MELUS has earned for our Society, thanks to the University of Southern California.

There were two goals that we still have not reached. One was to publish MELUS books. I predict that the first one of those will be along in a year or two now. The other we couldn't get off the ground: our Literary History of the United States from an Ethnic Perspective. We tried to rush this. Wayne Miller, Brom Weber, and I formed the editorial committee, and we grieved when we could not get financing for such a mammoth undertaking. I look back now aghast at our temerity!

Wayne Miller accepted the reality: "But we really are writing that history with every article in the journal. We are developing the body of material that will be needed when the work is finally put together."

And so we did. And so we have. But the truth is that, although Spiller told us that each generation should write its own history and one is now overdue, nobody has been able to do so, up to this day. In fact, Emory Elliott, who is editing the Columbia Literary History of the United States, says the result of the work "should be to unsettle rather than to reassure the book's readers."

We, the scholars of all American-ethnic literatures, have upset the applecart. The apples are still rolling all over. We still have a long way to go before we can show in an authoritative text the holistic nature of American Literature.

8

And this bring me to the second term of my title: scholarship.

Why didn't Aristotle make us take an oath the way Hippocrates made new physicians do? As far as I can recall, we were promised "emoluments and perquisities" as we swung our gold tassels from right to left...but no promises. We do have an unacknowledged code: diligence, authenticity, honesty, creativity, and integrity.

And in developing our new field, dedication to these high est ideal is extremely important. Conversely, a denial of these ideals is very, very easy. We bring to light obscure works, works in translations, works in non-traditional as well as accepted genres. Often we must translate aesthetic principles along with the non-English texts so that the literature can be interpreted by the standards of the culture in which it was produced. We can have subtle temptations. When little or nothag has been written about an author whose importance few people know--and fewer people have treated professionally -who is to say how honest we are? Sometimes the finding of one small item in a defunct newspaper is highly significant; in contrast, a long-winded plot-retelling should not be accepted; it should be deprecated as poor scholarship. We need to exercise that right to uphold scholarly standards.

We have been ridiculed, belittled, and refused tenure because we work in areas never before examined. [Of the remarks I got my favorite was "You have lost all scholarly integrity."]

But there is still another consideration, one which has been voiced both inside and outside MELUS, the dangers of the multi-ethnic approach. Some of you remember the "Response to a Statement by Katharine D. Newman," by R. Baxter Miller, that Wayne Miller published in MELUS in Spring 1984 (vol. 11, no. 1). His argument was that it was hazardous for any ethnic group to forget "the integrity of its own cultural space." The "multi-ethnic thing"

can be used for "the resurgence of the old paternalism and assimilation behind new masks." The Division of Ethnic Studies in MLA, he said, was a place where "we found ourselves listening to analyses of works outside of our scholarly and pedagogical expertise...Though we were right to believe in intercultural and inter-scholarly dialogue, many of us underestimated the need for sustained groundwork."

This view--that the matter of first importance is to develop the literary scholarship for one's own culture--is a valid one. It was given to me as a reason for not joining MELUS by two famous scholars, one in Afro-American Literature and one in Native American anthropology. There was just too much to do at home!

I need to explain that the quotation from a letter I had written to Baxter Miller was incomplete. I had written to him to express my regrets that I had not initially signed the petition for a separate Division of Black American Literature. With my habitual impulse to hold people in communication with each other, I had wanted all the separate cultures to have only "Discussion Group" status under the umbrella of the Division of Ethnic Studies. But I was wrong. I had come to see that we need all the sessions--and all the prestige that we can get for each separate culture--because the issue is political.

And it is precisely this fact that makes our scholarship so difficult. We do not have private suites in the Ivory Tower. We are on the street level of literature. We are dealing with writing about hatred, killings, torture, oppression, discrimination. We suffer pain as we read. We discuss the writing strategies of Fred-

erick Douglass while our stomachs writhe in pain sharing his anguish over the brutal lashing his young aunt got because she had visited her sweetheart. And even when the material is historical fiction, as the description of Dessa Rose's torture after her lover's murder, we are still swayed by emotions just as threatening to our professional skills as are the frustrations of physicians. And we too want to help others; we, too, want to bring about a better world. And, unlike many books that are publishers' delights, we are often dealing with neglected authors, unaccepted texts, dealing with explosive issues in which we are ourselves vitally concerned. But we dare not give way to sentiments. We must be steady of hand, not dealing with emotions but with truth.

We have done so very successfully, I believe, in our journal. In the first four years, when I was editor, i was privileged to accept articles analyzing ethnic literature from a variety of approaches: historical, sociological, anthropological, stylistic, linguistic, phenomenological, structural and deconstructional, intertextual, Marxist, and cultural. Did I miss any?--oh,yes--comparative, mythic, and ethno-generic. Very exciting stuff. Very important for all scholars of American literature.

And that, of course, brings us to the missing term in my title. I am not talking about "ethnic" literature. We here today are a community of scholars of American literature with a specialty in ethnic literature. Nothing less.

What is American literature? If we are to go on with our work, we must have a definition; otherwise our scholarship will be fragmentary and weak. We must be able to claim the rightful place for each work, written by all Americans, in any language they choose. We must be able to place each in relation to all. We must have a definition of American literature as a totality.

We know several definitions of American society, and we know none of them work: melting pot, smelting pot, salad bowl, quilt, mosaic, orchestra. I even tried to make a comparison with a shopping mall in one issue of our NewsNotes! But they are all too static--and they imply an unrealistic tone of harmony and unison that is not characteristic of our society nor reflected in our literature.

I have twice thought that I had published all I had to say on the relationship between "ethnic" writing and the "traditional" American literature. In my first anthology, the American Equation (1971), I tried to explore the ways in which all our writers use the "Other." Then, in our journal, MELUS, vol. 7, no. 1 (Spring 1980). I presented "An Ethnic Literary Scholar Views American Literature." My thesis was that "the ethnic approach is a perspective on American life as seen in literature produced by Americans." Today I think I would change "life" to "culture," and would include "values." Often this ethnic approach is that of (please pardon my gender-idiom) the Marginal Man. Standing to one side, this marginal person has significant observations for the Insiders. These--and some other ideas about systems and text--have been moving in my brain during these last seven years. You will recognize that I have encountered

the ideas of Claudio Guillen and of Edward Said. And I have stared at computer ads and molecular models. So now I'll have another try.

I offer my theory (without any cutesy symbol); the Componential Theory. I see every work--in all our literature, written or in the oral tradition--as made up of many components. This seems obvious; texts do differ from each other significantly, except the formulaic ones in popular culture . Each text then, can be connected with other texts in componential parallel. Say, to start, let us list all books written in southern California; this is not the same as all books with a southern California setting. We can erase that and put up a list of all books about surfers in southern California--which are manifestly different from the ones about the Japanese-Americans recovering from the Internment experience.

Obviously there are thousands and thousands of possible permutations and combinations. Of what good is all this?

Well, of such stuff are courses and anthologies made!

What I am asking you to do now is imagine each text, each piece of literature with its many components, as a ball. It is bouncing around with all the other balls. American literature, we say then, is <u>interactional</u>. There are "influences" which grow from creators contemplating our society and each other's work. There is similarity of theme, of character types, and of social consciousness,

from early fiction to the present. [Look at the religious conflicts in Scarlet Letter and Roger's Verdict]. The bildungsroman in this country is often the growing into maturity through adventures, exploration of wilderness, encounters with peoples of other races, especially in American cities. In American society, and in our texts, we are constantly bumping into each other.

What holds these many-componented balls in proximity is what I ask you to envision now. It is an enormous completely transparent globe, something like a super-collider, but enclosed, tough, and penetrable at all points. This wall, this skin, equates to the term "American Literature." Everything enclosed within has been composed by a person (or group of persons) who consider themselves as "Americans." This tag is not something we scholars impose; it is what the creator of the text says he is. he person who just slid over the border this afternoon may already be looking back at his native country with the eyes of a new American. But somebody who has lived here all his life may still want to claim loyalty (i. e. identification) ———————

to the country of his birth, where he still has citizenship.

Let me give two examples: Carlos Fuentes writes movingly, expressively, seductively in English. Alejandro Morales writes dramatically, poignantly, skillfully in Spanish, with occasional interspersings of English, yet Fuentes's work is not part of American literature. He is a Mexican; when he writes a book about Ambrose Bierce, he treats the American writer as an expatriate in Mexico, and Fuentes shows his own perspective when he uses the Mexican term, The Old Gringo. On the other hand, Morales, a professor of Spanish here at UCI and long-time MELUS member, writes Reto en el paraiso about the lives of Chicanos, some of several generations of Mexican descent and some expatriates, right here in Orange County. He describes the indignities, the hatreds, the personal lives of people who are Americans of different races. Morales is within this "skin" of American literature; Fuentes's work should be in courses labeled the Contemporary Mexican Novel.

The third term in our definition then is "transnational," and the fourth is "translingual." Thus I speak of the penetrability of that "wall" holding our texts together. Observe that a line goes from Spain to Mexico and then to California: the transatlantic passage of the Spanish language. Not only does Morales fit into the linguistic sequence, he also fits into the pattern of the Latin American novel, as exemplified by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in One Hundred Years of Solitude, the sharp zigzags of reality and fantastic happenings accepted as everyday occurrences. I have trouble jumping from anger over an account of lynchings here in paradise to the demise (if that's the term) of an Angloized young engineer who turned into a flower. [And when I asked Alejandro, he shrugged and said he didn't understand it either; it just happened!]

Actually there are some people who live on the very tegument itself: the American/Canadian and the American/Mexican Indians. Retaining their ancestral lands and ways, these tribes cross the imaginary national borders daily as they go about their own lives.

Their literature, especially in the oral tradition, is far removed from texts in "standard written English,"following the dogma of the narrative-mode, is inaccessible to the majority, even of zealous scholars of American literature. My own greatest difficulty has always been in trying to teach important works by American Indians, even when the author has the academic training of N. Scott Momaday. House Made of Dawn has many components. I know about the grunions that writhe in the light of the moon, the moon, That writhe in the light of the moon." But I am not sure whether albino is a person to Momaday, the symbol of evil to Abel, or a symbol of white hatred to me. When a book like this is called "uneven," as some of my colleagues declared all "ethnic" books are, I have learned to look closely to find those deviant components, those tell-tale signs that the text is authentic.

In short, I find ethnic books, much like other American works, to conform to what Maurice Bewley called the concept of "eccentricity."

And this brings me to other components which I find so often occurring in our literature as to form a unifying force.

The first is dialogue. More specifically, oral tradition or what Arlene Elder is now calling "Orature." It's amazing how much people talk in American books! Not only talk, but sometimes preach at length. As I drive along at times I amuse myself trying to recall all the sermons in American novels. 'Twould make a fun anthology.

Perhaps this need to communicate comes from our tremendous awareness of our differences. We spend much of our thought-time on the Other. Who are these people, so different from me? And what do they think about us? What can they do to us/for us? What must we do about them? "Otherness" is not a philosophical concept but our day to day reality.

And, predictably, there is the great common theme of all American literature: the necessity for choice. Moral and social dilemmas constantly confront American literary protagonists--from Huck Finn to John Updike's Rabbit or Leslie Silko's Tayo. Each must deal with Otherness in society: racism, violence, hypocrisy. The confrontations supply the core and the power of the works. Book characters often represent different value systems.

You will say, "But there are some books where there are only white characters, aren't there?" Yes. Certainly the formulaic books, the platitudinous romances, the routine mystery tales may, indeed, have no person of color among the characters. But, frequently, too, we note that the absence is a telling element. For example, The Red Badge of Courage deals with the testing of a boy's character. The "war" seems a convenient setting. But then we note one small passage in which the Negro drivers talk; we have a hint that there was a purpose in the war other than as a made-to-order instigating force of the development of a romantic boy.

Look at the icon of the 50's. When I was in graduate school, there was only one book which was sacrosanct. All others were devastated by my gleeful colleagues with their sharp little critical scalpels. This is one about the man who mistook another mammal for the devil, who abandoned his wife and child, caused the deaths of other husbands and fathers, despite the pleas of his

subordinate officer who had a sensible desire to live. He cheated his stockholders by compulsively gambling his ship away, and has ever since contributed to making the whale an endangered species.

We have now, you see, moved to the other side of hyphen: for ethnic-American we are now talking all-American. [Forgive me; yes, I know about all those exotic, mysterious, tragic non-whites who died that day. I don't even comment on the fact that the only survivor was a white male--though perhaps I should].

This--and other texts--are undeniably "American." Some of them seem to have sprung "de nova," such as Leaves of Grass, Walden, American Tragedy, and Huck Finn. But I refuse to accept them as products of the "dominant culture." I think Frances Foster has given us the right term: white-American-male-literature (WAML).

I believe there is a common culture. All of us participate in this and are affected by it. I said, rather lightly, that the Indian home on the reservation was part of that common culture if there was a TV there--and then I read Michael Dorris's A Yellow Raft on Blue Water--and it's true. The grandmother speaks the Indian language--and watches soap operas! And where do we place Mumbo Jumbo?

We must have a definition of American literature which encloses all these peoples, all these texts. Within my penetrable perimeter, we can observe what Guillen calls "some of the ways in which literature presents itself or functions historically as a system, i. e., as an order (of interacting parts) and a cluster of orders, changing yet enduring through the centuries." The "atomistic fallacy," he says, " occurs when a scholar treats an individual work and fails to show how the individual work of art did not merely become an

additional unit in a sum of spearate units. It entered the structural whole, a system, among whose parts significant and reciprocal relations existed."

Here is the totality of American literature.

And we must take action to insure all American readers their right to this common culture. Our contemporaries deserve to know such texts as Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Rise of David Leninsky, Rise of Silas Lapham, Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, Giants in the Earth, Ceremony, "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara." We have an obligation to get those works to their audience.

They need to see that history lies in the literatures of groups that are now almost totally assimilated, such as the Norwegian-American line that runs from Ibsen to Rolvaag to Garrison Keiller. "All the roots of all the groups," as Spiller said.

At present we cannot mandate that Bless Me, Ultima be taught in every cxourse on the American novel. But it is a great American novel, and we must work for the day when it will be taught with as much interpretation of Chicano culture as is now devoted to Puritanism when we teach Scarlet Letter.

In addition to an all-American literature course (which must include women!), our English majors --indeed, all Humanities majors--should be required to take at least one course in multi-ethnic literature or one in a specific ethnic literature: Asian-American, Jewish-American, Euro-American, American Indian, Hispanic-American. In the next decade, there may well be, in addition to the Black Literature courses we now have, courses in African-American; there will be Arab-American, etc., as incoming peoples develop their own contributions to our literature.

Yes, we have work to do. And we must make a few changes in our own thinking. We must abstain from the word "minority." Just this week I read about an anthologist who said, "We may have to remove sone of the major works in the book in order to put in some minority writers." QED: minority writers write minor literature; only majority writers can write major works. Not so! Ethnic writers, as we well know, have written many interesting and important texts. We are not interested in "minority literature," but that which is written by people with an ethnic perspective on American society.

And there isn't any "mainstream." That is another term we must not used. I used to be very puzzled about this image. It seems that somewhere (out in the hinterland?) there are minor[ity] tributaries that somehow get into this mainstream..or do they? I remember well that Swinburne told us, "Even the weariest river winds somewhere to the sea." But American literature never seemed to reach any sea. It just goes 'round and 'round, doesn't it!

Yes, as I reported, MELUS has been one of the forces that has expanded the canon of American literautre. But now we must go much fu rther. We and people who think like us claim to have the only view of the totality of American literature. We feel that all others are still piecemeal and temporary. They have built-in restrictions so that many works produced by Americans (again, including women) cannot be included in the rubric. We accept all texts. Our judgments are based on literary merit. We are right. We have the right to take action. We shall prevail.